DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 096 703 CS 500 792

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TITLE Current Debate: A Response to the Debate Blahs.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Speech Communication Association (Richmond, April, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Debate; *Intercollegiate Programs; Persuasive Discourse; *Problems; Relevance (Education); Speech

ABSTRACT

Intercollegiate debaters often have difficulty coming up with relevant topics for debate. Even when they do find current topics, by the end of an eight-month preparation period both the coaches and the debaters are bored. One possible alternative to this extension of the debate season might be found in current issues debate. Additional emphasis on this type of debate may have significant educational advantages. DSR-TKA operates current issues debate by allowing schools that have elected to participate in current issues debates to suggest topics for debate about six weeks to two months before the tournament. All participating schools vote on the topics and the most popular topic is selected. About three to four weeks before the tournament, the topic is announced. Each school then provides debaters prepared to debate on one side of the question. After the first day of debate, a parliamentary session is held with all the debaters and judges, and the participants may, if they wish, change the wording or nature of the proposition. This method may have drawbacks, but it does allow debaters a chance to consider topics that are not possible with a single national proposition, and it can also be enjoyable. (SW)

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CURRENT DEBATE: A RESPONSE TO THE DEBATE BLAHS

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
Southern Speech Communication Assn.
April, 1974

CS500792

Current Issues Debate: A Response to the Debate Blahs

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As we are now in the process of concluding another year of intercollegiate debate, many of us must have noticed a certain dreariness and lethargy creeping into our approach to the current national proposition. While we might have enjoyed the various approaches to a national energy policy embodied in such alternatives as ocean thermal gradients, magneto-hydrodynamics, fusion, fission, solar, methanol, hydrogen, external combustion engines, mass transit, the exclusion of nuclear reactors, and the ever-present risk of oil company oligopolies, most of us realized sometime around the end of January that the significant approaches to the energy question had been fully exploited. We continued to have our debaters labor additional hours in the library, adding to the thousands of evidence cards that had already created pulled arm muscles and back strain, and we did this knowing that the chances of such research providing meaningful new insights into the energy crises were marginal. We continued to work with the debaters from force of habit, or because we believe it is good for debaters to stay in the library, or because we hoped to pin down a few extra arguments in the crucial rounds. But debaters and coaches had already been examining the same issues for six months, and the only result of the additional labor was the new and inventive debate cases that emerged at the district debate tournament.

We have a problem in intercollegiate debate. The problem is not that our debaters work too little; it may be that they work too much. The problem is not one of motivating our debaters; they may well be over-motivated. The problem

is not one of slip-shod and silly analysis; current debate teams have analyzed arguments down to the fifth rebuttal response. The problem is rather that we have been too successful, and our success has meant that we run out of a topic before we run out of debate tournaments. Both debaters and coaches find themselves in an end of the season torpor as they go through the process of dealing with the same old cases, the same old arguments, and the same old flow sheets, occasionally interrupting the monotony with a "flaming squirrel" that is usually an old approach to the topic disguised in a new structure. I see this as a problem, and I should like to pose a possible solution to this problem.

Allow me to suggest at the outset, however, that I do not view current debate practices as necessarily undesirable. We all know that debaters talk too rapidly, but that is only their adaptation to this particular communication setting. We all know that debaters frequently misuse evidence, but that is most often because they are learning how to use evidence rather than from deliberate attempts to distort. We all know that debaters frequently strain the meaning and intent of the topic, but language is inherently ambiguous, and the debate process is as good a way of determining meaning as any other. We also know, moreover, that all these problems have always existed with debate and did not appear with the advent of the contemporary, sample case carrying debater. Intercollegiate debate remains a valuable educational experience. For most college and university students, debate is their only exposure to serious efforts at analysis and research on critical national questions.

Classes, seminars, and term papers might provide the same benefits, but in practice they rarely do, for few students willingly devote the time to an individual paper or course that the debater gives to intercollegiate debate.

We do have virtues in intercollegiate debate, and some of those virtues derive from the throrough and complete examination of a single, broad, critical policy question. Only with this type of question can debaters and coaches devote the time that is essential for rigorous analysis, for drill on arguments, and for an examination of a variety of alternatives to the problem. I believe it would be foolish for those interested in promoting debate to relinquish the benefits of a broad national proposition, but simply because a single topic offers advantages in time, analysis, and the opportunity for teaching, this does not mean that those advantages are all inclusive, or that we can reasonably expect those advantages to stretch over an eight-month debate season. For the past two years, we have been blessed with good debate topics. Both the question of health care and the question of energy policy have provided a timely examination of serious national questions. Both provided the opportunity for complete analysis and the examination of a variety of policy alternatives. And both were specifically enough worded that there was a reasonable chance that the central thrust of the topic was debated by the end of the year. But for both questions, debaters and coaches wearied of the topic by that time, and I would suggest that the last two months of debate provided little educational advantage.

One possible alternative to this extension of the debate season might be found in current issues or contemporary issues debate. Current issues debate is not, to use recent educational jargon, a startlingly innovative idea. For years many schools have had forums, audience debates, and even, on occasion, debate tournaments on topics other than the national debate proposition. But while it does not represent a new idea, it certainly does represent an idea that has not been fully exploited by the intercollegiate debate community. For the past two years I have worked with the current issues division of the DSR-TKA National Conference, and my experience with that division suggests that additional emphasis on current issues debate could have significant educational advantages.

Before I present those advantages, allow me to explain how DSR-TKA operates current issues debate. About six weeks to two months before the tournament, those schools that have elected to participate in current issues suggest topics for debate. The director of the division selects the most popular topics, or, if there are a limited number of entries, all the topics, and asks the participating schools to vote on topic selection. Between three to four weeks before the tournament, the topic is announced. Each school then provides debaters prepared to debate on only one side of the question. After the first day of debate, a parliamentary session is held with all the debaters and judges, and the participants may, if they wish, change the wording or nature of the proposition. All of the debating follows the standard ten-five format.

Any number of variations could be made in this process. Every year serious questions have been raised about providing an opportunity for cross-examination, and this might well be a valuable addition to this type of debate. Debaters might also be required to debate both sides of the issue, and this could aid their analysis of the significant issues. The parliamentary session could be dropped, elimination rounds could be added, even the time limits could be changed. If current issues were used in the place of standard debate, the host school might simply announce the topic rather than have a vote of the participants.

Whatever the format, the essential advantages remain. First, the debaters would be able to consider topics that are not possible with a single national proposition. The past two topics at the DSR-TKA Conference have been:

Resolved: That Violence is Justified in the Struggle for Human Rights, and,

Resolved: That the Federal Government should Grant a Universal Amnesty to all Draft Evaders and Deserters from the Vietnam Conflict.

Both of these topics have dealt with serious areas of national debate. The amnesty question is currently engaging the attention of Congressional committees and has led to heated controversy throughout the country. Both topics were certainly worthy of consideration, and in the process of debate confronted the students with issues that they would not normally meet in traditional intercollegiate debate.

The question on violence, for example, became essentially a value proposition, and the debater had to adapt to a situation where harms, needs, and advantages were not serious concepts and any idea of a plan attack was utterly meaningless. Not only were affirmative teams required to extend their analysis into the comparative justification of violence and human rights, but negative teams were also expected, but the nature of the topic, to have a well-thought-out negative position and philosophy rather than a simple point-by-point refutation. The debates, then, hinged on which value judgments were better defended. This seems a legitimate area of inquiry for debate, particularly since questions of value, even when they are integral parts of the proposition, are virtually ignored in standard intercollegiate debate. No one, for instance, questions the value of forcing all Americans to drive large automobiles if it can be demonstrated that this might save 5,000 lives and the negative team is unable to provide an overriding disadvantage.

The question of amnesty also involved the debaters with issues that they would not normally confront. Although this was a question of policy, since the proposition required the federal government to take legislative action, the debater still had to face up to value issues. The central issues in these debates focused on the question of the morality or immorality of the Vietnamese War, an issue not easily settled by appeals to documentation, and on the consideration the nation should give to the rule of law. While these

debates more nearly followed the pattern of standard debate, the issues of harms, inherency, and plan attacks did not fit into neat blocks. Occasionally, even the language of debate improved.

The second advantage of current issues debate is that it was enjoyable. The debaters and the judges had fun sifting through these issues and, as one rather distinguished director of forensics commented, "The debaters forced me to think. It was not simply a matter of plugging in arguments on a flow chart." The debaters responded to the challenge of dropping traditional debate patterns and came to realize that, although the first affirmative rebuttal did not reply to all attacks, enough crucial issues did carry through the debate for an affirmative to legitimately win. This is not to suggest that all the debating was superior. Much of it was less than outstanding, but even the less desirable debate had an excitement that is never found in a bad debate on the national proposition. The advantage of enjoyment in end-of-the-year debate should not be overlooked.

I am not trying to argue that we can find any necessary virtue in having students debate value propositions. What I am trying to suggest is that these were worthwhile topics for debate, but they could never be used within the format of a single national proposition. These topics, and others that could come to mind--tenure for college faculty, judgments on pornography and obscenity, even the impeachment of the President--are too limited to provide good debate for an extended season, but they could produce excellent debate

for a single tournament. My suggestion is that we limit the amount of time we devote to a single topic, and then for the last few months of the debate season have tournaments devoted to current issues debate. This would provide our students with additional educational opportunities, would allow for a greater variation of topics, and might even bring additional interest and excitement to end-of-the-season debate.

I realize that we face two serious obstacles, disadvantages if you will, in having current issues debate for the last few months of the debate season. The first is that this would require a change in the National Debate Tournament. While some would not lament the passing of the National Tournament, I suspect that any nationally competitive activity has a need for a national champion, and I doubt that such a drastic step as abolition would be required. Rather, we could hold the NDT earlier in the year, possibly at the end of January or the beginning of February. If you accept my original analysis, that six months of work on a single proposition is enough, then that is the logical time for the NDT. This would then create the second disadvantage. Some of the finer national tournaments are held after the beginning of February. I see no easy solution to this problem. Hopefully, those tournaments might still be maintained, only they would use a current issues proposition rather than the national proposition. There is, however, the possibility that the host schools might choose to cancel these tournaments.

Whatever the solution to these problems, I hope that we can begin to incorporate current issues into our debate programs. Good debaters arguing a fresh proposition usually provide exciting debate. We should be able to share that excitement in April as well as October.